"A FRAMEWORK TO IMPROVE THE SOCIAL UNION FOR CANADIANS" MOBILITY PROVISIONS

MEETING OUR COMMITMENTS

Alberta

GOVERNMENT OF ALBERTA

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INTRODUCTION

On February 4, 1999, First Ministers, except the Premier of Quebec, signed *A Framework to Improve the Social Union for Canadians*. This Agreement represents an important attempt by governments to establish a new approach for working together to better meet the needs of Canadians.

First Ministers agreed to include in the Framework Agreement a section relating to the "freedom of movement of Canadians". Alberta, like all governments, believes that an essential element of Canadian citizenship is the opportunity for Canadians to be able to move anywhere in Canada to pursue opportunities. Reflecting this belief among governments, Section 2 of the Framework Agreement contains a number of commitments to enhance Mobility in Canada.

Under the Social Union Framework Agreement, governments agree to:

- Ensure that no new barriers to mobility are created in new social policy initiatives.
- Eliminate, within three years, any residency-based policies or practices which constrain access to post-secondary education, training, health, and social services and social assistance unless they can be demonstrated to be reasonable and consistent with the principles of the Social Union Framework.
- Submit annual reports to the Ministerial Council identifying residency-based barriers to access and providing action plans to eliminate them.
- To ensure, by July 1, 2001, full compliance with the mobility provisions of the *Agreement on Internal Trade* by all entities subject to those provisions.

ALBERTA REVIEW PROCESS

In keeping with the commitment to eliminate within three years any residency based policies or practices which constrain access, the Government of Alberta undertook a thorough examination of social policies and programs. This review

was conducted by a Working Group of Senior Officials, which included representation from the following Alberta departments:

- Health and Wellness
- Human Resources and Employment
- Learning
- Children's Services
- Treasury
- Justice, and
- Community Development.

The Working Group surveyed all social programs provided by these departments to determine where a residency-based policy or practice, either in the form of a waiting period, quota, or differential fee, may exist. Such policies or practices were then assessed to ensure their reasonableness and consistency with the principles of the Social Union Framework Agreement.

The Working Group's findings were transmitted to the Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations. The findings were then discussed with the Ministers of departments that had participated in the review, prior to consideration by the Standing Policy Committee on Finance and Intergovernmental Relations. The decision of the Standing Policy Committee was then approved by Cabinet.

RESULTS OF ALBERTA REVIEW TO MARCH 31, 2000

In reviewing the programs of these seven departments, Alberta went well beyond a narrow interpretation of the Social Union Framework Agreement to include the broadest possible range of programs. Of the many programs that were examined, only three were identified that contain what may be characterized as an unreasonable residency-based policy or practice.

- **Home Adaptation Program**

  Provided by Alberta Community Development, this program has a budget of $1.2 million to provide grants to make residences wheelchair accessible. It plays a vital role in ensuring Albertans who are in wheelchairs can remain in their own homes.

  This program currently has a residency requirement of 12 months. Given the long-term benefits that result from this program, which enhances individual independence and enlarges the stock of wheelchair accessible housing in Alberta, this residency requirement will be reduced to three months. This is seen as a reasonable waiting period for access to the program.

- **Skills Development Program**

  Provided by Alberta Human Resources and Employment, this major program, with a budget of more than $100 million, provides grants for basic education and skills training programs to Albertans demonstrating financial need. It is an important part of the *Alberta Advantage*, and helps to ensure that all Albertans have the skills necessary to succeed in today's economy.

  The program currently has a 12-month residency requirement for new residents who are ineligible for Alberta Supports for Independence or Employment Insurance. Alberta Human Resources and Employment intends to undertake a broad program review over the coming months. One of the issues to be addressed is the reasonableness of the residency requirement.

- **Alberta Student Loans**

  The Alberta Student Loans program, provided by Alberta Learning, is a key component of our post-secondary system. However, a potential barrier to mobility was identified in our review, as undergraduate loans were not fully portable to institutions outside of Alberta. We recognize the value to individual Albertans, and the province, of pursuing undergraduate studies both within Alberta and elsewhere in Canada. Rather than wait to address

this issue through a harmonization agreement with the federal government, Alberta Learning has enhanced the Loans Program by $5 million, thereby making loans fully portable for all undergraduate students wishing to attend programs outside Alberta.

LABOUR MOBILITY

The mobility of workers has always been a key issue for Alberta. The Labour Mobility Chapter of the Agreement on Internal Trade provides the framework for governments across Canada to ensure that any worker qualified for an occupation in their home province will have similar occupational opportunities in other provinces.

In Alberta, significant progress has already been made. Professions and occupational groups such as Opticians, Registered Nurses and Veterinarians are currently negotiating mutual recognition agreements with their counterparts across the country. It is Alberta's hope that the mobility requirements of the Social Union Framework Agreement will encourage an even higher degree of compliance with the Agreement on Internal Trade. As the co-chair of the committee of federal and provincial Ministers responsible for internal trade, Alberta will take a strong role in encouraging all jurisdictions to ensure compliance by July 2001.

CONCLUSION

As with several other jurisdictions, the results of Alberta's review seem to reveal that for the most part, governments have not placed within social programs residency based policies or practices that constrain mobility. Alberta will continue to monitor our programs to ensure compliance with the mobility provisions, and is committed to moving forward on the implementation of all aspects of the Framework Agreement. It is Alberta's sincere hope that all jurisdictions will work, where appropriate, through the Council on Social Policy Renewal to ensure meaningful implementation of all elements of *A Framework to Improve the Social Union for Canadians*.